

## Cloud of concern

*Tuesday, January 18, 2005*

You have to wonder what it will take for the federal government to get serious about protecting against chemical disasters.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, there have been many warnings that terrorists might target chemical plants or rail cars carrying chemicals.

Now, those concerns have been renewed by the recent chlorine leak in South Carolina that killed nine people, made more than 250 people sick and forced the evacuation of 5,400.

The leak, caused by a train collision, is a reminder of just how deadly certain chemicals are in the huge quantities used by industry and transported on rail lines. It also highlighted the fact that chemical accidents remain as much a risk as terrorist attacks.

The National Transportation Safety Board reported last year that more than half of the 60,000 rail tank cars used to transport hazardous chemicals are old, not built according to current safety standards and susceptible to rupture in an accident.

As Record Staff Writer Alex Nussbaum reported Sunday, rail lines in New Jersey carry hundreds of tons of hazardous materials daily through densely populated Bergen and Passaic counties and the rest of the state.

Chemicals are a fact of life in an industrialized world. But the federal government could do far more to prevent the sort of toxic cloud that hung over Graniteville, S.C.

A bill sponsored by Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., would mandate tougher security at chemical plants and require businesses to switch to less hazardous substances where feasible. But Republican leaders have balked, saying businesses should be free to improve plant security voluntarily and to choose what chemicals they use.

New Jersey provides an example of how well such government prodding can work. Two decades ago, after a chemical leak at a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, killed thousands, New Jersey passed the Toxic Catastrophe Prevention Act.

The law requires plants that store certain extremely hazardous substances to assess risks, increase training and pay fees based on the danger of their operations. It prompted some industries to switch to less hazardous substances, such as water and sewage treatment plants that reduced chlorine use by cleaning water with ozone, ultraviolet light and bleach.

Still, New Jersey's law hasn't eliminated the risk. The state has 26 plants that use large quantities of chlorine, for example. One of them is a South Kearny bleach maker with chlorine tanks that, if there were a major leak, would release a toxic cloud over an area with 12 million people.

Another problem is that New Jersey's law is aimed solely at preventing accidental leaks.

Mr. Corzine's proposed Chemical Security Act focuses on protecting against terrorist attacks. Congress must make its passage a priority.